

Gathering in Worship . . .

. . . when we don't physically gather

By now, every Friend is feeling some impact from the coronavirus pandemic. Some of us are in places where transmission has become common. Some of us are in places that have just begun to see cases. Some of us have not yet had cases in our area, but we're feeling anxious. We start to wonder: should we cancel our meetings for worship? Some already have.

And even you haven't cancelled, and don't plan to cancel, you will see reduced attendance as Friends make the individual or family decision to stay home. How can you remain a worshipful body when some or all of you are no longer physically gathering?

Some meetings are exploring options to connect by videoconference, or by phone, or even by worshipping individually in different places but at the same time. No matter what option you try, *it will feel different*. Worshipping in new ways will not be the same as physically gathering together. But can you trust that, if you are faithful, God will find a way to make it work?

Below, you'll find suggestions for a number of ways to meet in worshipful gatherings without *physically* gathering. If you are led to try these experiments, I pray that you will find the presence of God is among you—as it always is.

In Friendship,

Emily Provance, clerk of New York Yearly Meeting's Ministry Coordinating Committee

Unprogrammed Worship by Videoconference

Zoom is one excellent technology for videoconferences. If your group is more familiar with another service, you might try that. Zoom can also be accessible to some Friends by video and other Friends by ordinary phones (audio only), if that's the technological arrangement that works best for your group.

It's helpful to have a named facilitator for videoconference worship. The facilitator is responsible for welcoming people warmly as they join the call. A verbal welcome assures Friends that their technology is working. The facilitator can also indicate verbally when Friends are expected to settle into silence and begin worship, as well as ending the worship at the appointed time, or at a time that feels right, and offering announcements and/or inviting joys and concerns. Your facilitator can be any Friend who feels comfortable with the role and commits to being present.

One important note is to make sure that everyone, whether joining by video or by phone, mutes their microphones when they are not giving ministry in order to prevent background noise.

*from New York Yearly Meeting's
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The facilitator can remind everyone of this as they are gathering. It also helps to go ahead and name the strangeness and newness of the experience! When the facilitator affirms this verbally, it helps everyone relax a bit.

It will also help to identify an elder whose specific responsibility it is to hold the meeting for worship in prayer. Gathering for worship by video and phone is harder than doing it in person, especially if it's new for your group. A prayerful elder can provide important spiritual support.

If your meeting is very large, consider having multiple Zoom worships per week, dividing Friends into groups.

You can read a lot more advice about using Zoom at the link below. These suggestions were assembled by Sara Hubner of New England Yearly Meeting.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/11eStA1tMMD8yjOPtr5qXUCeAmohfwiWQroYZ00_Bhuc/edit

Unprogrammed Worship by Phone

For some groups, video technology either isn't possible or isn't preferred. In that case, worship by phone is also a reasonable option.

It's helpful to have a named facilitator for phone-based worship. The facilitator is responsible for welcoming everyone warmly as the call begins. The person should also write down names of people who join as they announce themselves and then, before worship starts, should read the list of the names and ask if anyone is on the call who did not hear their name read. This helps everyone know who is present.

One important note is to make sure that everyone mutes their phones (if possible) when they are not giving ministry in order to prevent background noise. Most phones do have a mute button, and Friends should take a look to see if they can find theirs. The facilitator can remind everyone of this as they are gathering. It also helps to go ahead and name the strangeness and newness of the experience! When the facilitator affirms this verbally, it helps everyone relax a bit.

It will also help to identify an elder whose specific responsibility it is to hold the meeting for worship in prayer. Gathering for worship by phone is harder than doing it in person, especially if it's new for your group. A prayerful elder can provide important spiritual support.

There are many free conference call services. Ask a Friend with Internet access to set up the call by visiting uberconference.com or another conference call service. After setting up the call, the Friend will need to pass on to others the necessary phone number and access code.

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Unprogrammed Worship from a Distance (without technology)

The Spirit can extend across distances in remarkable ways. Some meetings might decide to choose a time, either weekly or daily, when all Friends will stop their activities and settle into worship in their individual locations for a predetermined length of time. You are likely to discover that, even with no physical or technological connection, you are able to feel the presence of God and of one another.

You might choose to combine this approach with an email address where Friends can share joys and concerns. These can be collected over the week and sent to Friends before worship so that the list can be held in prayer.

Semi-Programmed Worship and Worship Sharing

Even if your meeting is accustomed to unprogrammed worship, you might find that either semi-programmed worship or worship sharing is easier, regardless of whether you are meeting by videoconference or by phone.

If you choose worship sharing, you should still select a facilitator. (See the above sections on unprogrammed worship by videoconference or phone.) The facilitator should offer a query for reflection and should articulate the common expectations of worship sharing. You can find some good guidelines for worship sharing at this link:

https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Worship%20Sharing%20Guidelines_1.pdf

If you choose to explore semi-programmed worship, identify ahead of time who will take on which roles and in what order. You might have a Friend in your meeting who is a musician who can share vocal or instrumental music. You might ask another Friend to offer a prayer and another to bring a reading or a prepared message. Your worship can include all of these things and also some unprogrammed worship time. Choose a facilitator in advance who will be responsible for greeting Friends, explaining the order of worship, managing transitions (saying what comes next as you move through the worship), and reminding Friends about things like turning off their microphones when they are not speaking.

Prayer Meetings

Prayer meetings are another form of worshipful gathering that you might try by phone or by videoconference. Begin with a facilitator who can greet everyone and then ask Friends to name their prayer requests. Prayer requests can be specific or general, personal or broad. The facilitator can keep a list of prayer requests as they are named. Once Friends have had a chance to name their requests, the facilitator can read one out loud at a time and then pause. During that pause, Friends might hold the request in the Light or might feel led to offer audible prayers, or perhaps both.

Non-Physical Worship Opportunities Already Available

Sometimes, joining something that already exists works just as well as inventing something new! Visit Kathleen Wooten's page, "Being the Church Online," at the link below. Kathleen is a Friend from New England Yearly Meeting. Halfway down the page, you'll find a list of online Quaker worship gatherings that already occur. These are gatherings that existed *before* Covid-19, so the Friends that conduct them are well-practiced.

<http://quakerkathleen.org/being-the-church-online/>

Also, Emily Provance of New York Yearly Meeting is starting a new daily family devotional, with songs, stories, and queries, by videoconference. This gathering is especially intended for families whose children are not in school due to the coronavirus. You can sign up to receive information about these devotionals at the link below.

<https://quakeremily.wordpress.com/connection-in-a-time-of-covid-19/>

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Pandemic

by Lynn Unger, a Unitarian-Universalist minister

What if you thought of it
as the Jews considered the Sabbath--
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

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